

Savage War for ‘Development’

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In India today, private corporate-led industrialisation is being equated with development” and those who oppose such development are considered “unlawful”, never mind that the government and the corporations acquire land through “force and fraud”. Those who organise the resistance — “left-wing extremists” in official parlance — either face elimination through military operations or the total denial of their democratic rights. It is therefore necessary to demystify, rather de-obfuscate, official policy vis-a-vis “left-wing extremism”.

“Left-wing extremists” are neither “enemy combatants” nor stateless mercenaries. They are our own people, and they will remain so even when the government prosecutes war against them. The term “war” is used deliberately. When it comes to looking at military suppressions amidst us, there is a tendency to characterise them as less than a war. The reason we do not perceive such suppressions as war is because they take place within the borders of the nation state where the deployment of the “armed forces of the union” is considered legitimate, among other reasons, because private corporate-led industrialisation is equated with “development” and those who oppose such development are considered “unlawful” and often accused of disloyalty and treason. Never mind that the government and the corporations acquire land through “force and fraud”. And those who organise resistance either face elimination through military operations, crippled by charges of sedition and “waging war”, or are choked of their right of expression. It is therefore necessary to demystify, rather de-obfuscate, official policy vis-a-vis “left-wing extremism” (“LWE”).

On December 20, 2007 at the chief ministers’ (CM’s) conference on internal security the prime minister (PM) in his opening speech began: “As we survey the national security scenario, there are a few aspects which are cause of concern. I wish to highlight a few of them.” He then referred to “LWE” that continues

to affect many districts of our country. Just a few days ago, we had a major incident of a jailbreak in Chhattisgarh. This was not an isolated incident. Not a day passes with-

out an incident of left-wing extremism taking place somewhere or the other. Over the last year, the activities of Naxal groups have revealed new aspects. They seem to have developed the capability in some areas to launch frontal attacks on police forces and establishments. They are certainly targeting all aspects of economic activity. They are targeting vital economic infrastructure so as to cripple transport and logistical capabilities and also slow down any development activity. This helps them sustain their ideology of deprivation and neglect. They have even managed to eliminate some important political leaders and their associates in some state.

Therefore, the PM went on to say, “(w)e cannot rest in peace until we have eliminated this virus. ... we need to cripple the hold of *Naxalite* forces with all means at our command.” He went on to add, “(w)hile tackling Naxal groups militarily, we also need to choke their support infrastructure”.

‘Biggest Security Challenge’

For the PM to reiterate in his speech that “LWE” is “probably the single biggest security challenge to the Indian state” is problematic if not open to question. It is problematic, because it invokes the omnibus category of “LWE” to collapse the politics of all *Naxalite* groups into a single category. It is debatable because Manmohan Singh’s own party and the union home minister hold a position at variance with his. Indeed, his contention is closer to that of the Bharatiya Janata Party which makes it appear that “LWE” afflicts one-third of India. Whereas the Congress Party has claimed that just 300 police stations out of 14,000 are affected, the home minister says that “LWE” is confined to only three states. Nevertheless, the Congress and the BJP seem to agree that “LWE” has to be crushed. Thus 33 battalions of the central paramilitary forces have been provided to “*Naxalite* affected states”. The centre is financing the raising of 35 India Reserve battalions by “*Naxalite* Affected States” (*The Economic Times*, December 25, 2007). And Chhattisgarh has asked for an additional 10 battalions for just the Abujmad area of Bastar! All told, 70,000–90,000 armed personnel, about five-seven divisions, are being pitted against an officially estimated 8,000–9,000 armed cadres.

All this is intimidating. But people do not have the propensity to take up arms, let alone to sustain armed struggle for over four decades, without popular support. The area where Maoist insurgency is sustained is populated by several million people; the Maoists are organically linked with the people. And like all organic relationships it is a live engagement with shared experiences of working and fighting together, which at times has become contentious.

It is significant that the PM pins the blame on “LWE” for slowing down economic activity, in his view, to “sustain their ideology”, but he is silent over the 60 years of deprivation and neglect by the state. This is not a matter of detail. It is a matter of conceptual clarity and therefore goes to the very heart of the issue. In the PM’s speech, there is reference to uneven development, the inter-regional divide, the rural-urban divide and the inter-sectoral divide. He is even aware of details such as that “there were only three staff in the Dantewada jail where the jailbreak took place” or of “large vacancies of police personnel across most states”. But not once does he refer to the life experience of people at the receiving end of official highhandedness, the greed of the corporate elite and the bitter struggle over land, where landless labourers and poor and middle peasants are protesting against the loss of livelihoods and the expropriation of their land through coercion.

In the Name of ‘Development’

Take the district Dantewada in Chhattisgarh, which figures in the PM’s speech. It has a rural literacy level of 21 per cent; 1,161 out of 1,200 villages have no medical facility of any kind. The People’s Union for Civil Liberties (Chhattisgarh), in a publication dated March 2004, report, after investigation, on the occurrence of deaths due to hunger and malnutrition in Hirpal and Gidam block of the district. An allIndia fact-finding report had noted that

(w)hile the people of Dantewada are extremely poor, their land is extremely rich, both in terms of minerals and forests, When the government talks of “development”, it appears to have in mind the development of these resources for private profit as against the development of its people. When organisations and movements have pointed out that the two are not synonymous, and that the very mining and industrial activity has been practised in the past has resulted in the displacement and consequent pauperisation of tribals in this region, they are called ‘anti-development’?¹

The state government has signed deals worth Rs 13,000 crore with industrial corporations and is determined to push them through. It is this process which is being heralded as ushering in development. But what if the people who own or till these lands do not want this “development”? Well, the simple way of dealing with them is to brush aside their opposition.

¹“When the State Makes War on Its Own People: A Report on Violation of People’s Rights during the Salwa Judum Campaign in Dantewada, Chhattisgarh”, an all-India fact finding by APDR (West Bengal), IAPL, PUCL (Chhattisgarh), PUCL (Jharkhand) and PUDR (Delhi), April 2006, p. 7 www.pudr.org

Take the case of the privatisation of rivers. Despite strictures passed by the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) in its report submitted to the Chhattisgarh legislative assembly on March 2007 on the privatisation of the Sheonath river in 1998 — the PAC even categorised the mode as “criminal” — no action has been taken on the recommendations. The PAC was set up in 2003 as a result of a long drawn out struggle launched by people who were outraged at the selling of Sheonath river in 1998. While this agitation was going on, Radius Water, a company set up by Kailash Engineering, which won the contract to execute the project, became the “owner” for 22 years of the river’s waters. This was justified in the name of meeting the requirement of industries which also meant concomitant denial of water for the irrigation needs of farmers during the summer months. Radius began fencing land along the river. By 2000 they fenced 22.7 kms of river, took over thousands of sq ft of land, as well as 176 acres along the river bank. The company acquired assets valued at Rs 5 crore by paying a princely sum of Rs 1 to the Madhya Pradesh Aydyogik Kendra Nigam and collected Rs 1.84 crore from the Chhattisgarh State Industrial Development Corporation in the very first year of operation. This “criminal” practice also went on to become the norm. One after another, the rivers Kelo, Kurkut, Shabri, Kharm and Maand have been handed over to private companies. Coincidentally, a large part of the very same Sheonath river whose privatisation had been described as a crime, and which flows through Dantewada, is under occupation of Essar Steel Chhattisgarh (Ashok Prakash Putul, ‘Bastar Privatisation Unlimited: Rivers for Sale in Chhattisgarh’ at www.bhumkal.blogspot.com).

What is being implemented is a model of development as if people do not matter. A report of the People’s Union for Democratic Rights (PUDR) into three mining projects in Orissa’s Kalahandi and Rayagada districts confirms this widespread phenomenon and notes the “extreme marginalisation of most people” in the two districts. The report speaks of “near total dependence on depressed agriculture ... low irrigation facilities ... worsened by inequitable land relations, token and partial land reforms, and by extremely low educational levels and healthcare facilities provided by the state. It is in these conditions that these ... mining projects are pushed through”. It describes the secret surveys and procuring of consent through force and fraud and points to the carrot of “vague oral promises of permanent jobs and large salaries, made by the company and district administration.” The stick was “anything but imaginary. From armed police and paramilitary presence everywhere, flag marches through peaceful tribal villages, beatings, threats, arbitrary warrants and arrests, to firing and killing of protestors — the regions even remotely affected by the alumina

projects live under the constant shadow of the stick”.²

Such findings are repeated elsewhere across the country, in particular, the *adivasi* areas of Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Orissa. Contemporaneously, the Delhi High Court recently quashed the grant of a prospecting licence to Tata Steel to mine iron ore in an area spread over 2,500 ha of forests in Dantewada. The high court ruled that whenever the state is asked to divert any land for non-forest purposes, prior approval under the relevant forest law and rules are needed (*Press Trust of India*, New Delhi, February 25, 2008). Tribals were so resentful of the loss of their multi-crop fertile land that they were talking of armed resistance against the 5 million tonne Tata Steel plant coming up in Dantewada for which these mines were sought. The inspector general of police (Bastar range) however warned that “strictest of action will be taken against anybody coming in the way of the democratic process involved in setting up this plant” (*The Hindustan Times*, November 18, 2007).

The order only quashes the mining right but not the setting up of the steel plant for which too land was acquired. Therefore, it is a partial relief and probably temporary too; the superior court may stay this order. Or, if everything else fails, the government can propose changes to circumvent the judicial ruling, as was attempted in 2000 after the Andhra Pradesh High Court judgment in the Samatha case.³

There have also been gross violations of statutory provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996, especially section 4 (i) which provides for consultations with the gram sabhas for land acquisition and also empowers them under section 4(m)(3) to prevent alienation of land in scheduled areas as well as to restore “any unlawfully alienated land in a scheduled area”. In area after area gram sabhas have seen their statutory powers cast aside by the corporations. An obliging government machinery wilfully uses the security forces to coerce *adivasis* into signing away their land in exchange for “trinkets”, failing which they face eviction without “compensation”. The fate of other protective legislations which regulate the procedure for land or forest acquisition has been no different.

²Halting the Mining Juggernaut: People’s Struggles against Alumina Projects in Orissa’, PUDR, July 2005, p. 13, www.pudr.org.

³See ‘Abandoned: Development and Displacement’, published by the Perspectives Team, New Delhi, 2007, chapter 111, pp 15–17. This researched reference book cites a letter from ministry of mines (No 16/48/97-M.VI dated July 10, 2000) which proposes amendment to the fifth schedule and Article 244 under the plea these Acts “cannot purport to take away the sovereign right of government to transfer its land in any manner”.

Parallel Orbits

In short, the lived experience of people has been that writ petitions, affidavits and memoranda have not helped arrest, let alone reverse, the loss of rivers, lands and forests, the criminal prosecution of those who staked claims to *adivasi* land and/or manufactured gram sabha consent in Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Orissa for corporate-led industrialisation. In Dantewada district in 2006 land was acquired for the Essar and Tata projects through the use of force (*Down to Earth*, October 31, 2006 for details). In Kocheipadar gram sabha in Rayagada district of Orissa too, consent for the Alcan–Hindalco project was forcibly acquired (*The Times of India*, April 4, 2006). More recently, in Kalinganagar in Orissa, a private army is browbeating villagers to give their land to the multi-national South Korean company POSCO.

Dantewada is not just an area notorious for the Salwa Judum (SJ) caused evacuation of 644 villages and displacement of 3,00,000 people, but also for the illegal and unlawful occupation of lands, forests and rivers by corporations, and the manufacturing of gram sabha consent under duress. Interestingly, even when the PM refers to the jailbreak he remains innocent of the issue of arrest of *adivasis* and their incarceration in crowded jails for simply being in the way of corporate marauders and their administrative henchmen.

It is unlawful to advocate/express an opinion on the matter of seizure of power and to work to change the world. How is this to be done? Should it be through an armed struggle, peaceful means or a fusion of the two is an open-ended question and there is as much to be said one way or the other. Why should the opponents of the Indian state be gagged, banned, censored, arrested, tortured, narco-analysed, brain mapped, killed or entangled in so many cases that chances of freedom in one's lifetime become remote if not impossible? Why should these voices be smothered? Why should mobilisation against oppressive conditions be denied because a slice of Indian society is convinced that salvation lies in ramming through corporate industrialisation via the creation of enclaves following upon acquisition of fertile land or forests by repressive means?

Remarkably, when *adivasis* have demonstrated peacefully, their demands have remained unheeded. Six weeks before the PM delivered his speech to the CMs, 2,00,000 *adivasis* gathered at Jagdalpur, on November 5 last year. They had walked for 3–5 days from a radius of 250 kms around Jagdalpur to attend a rally of the *Adivasi Mahasangh*. The slogans called for a withdrawal of the paramilitary forces and expressed an emphatic *no* to the SJ. The tribal people demonstrated against land acquisition and corporate plunder. If they were upset with the Maoists they could have given vent to their feelings against them. But they did not. Why? Because the mass of

adivasis living outside the SJ camps are concerned with “operation land/forest/water grab” and the crimes of the SJ activists and the paramilitary, rather than the alleged “*dadagiri*” of the “*dadalog*” (as the Maoists leaders are called).

It is necessary to ponder over the baleful tone of the operative parts of the PM’s speech: “eliminate this virus”; “cripple the hold” ... with “all means at our command”; “choke the support infrastructure” of “all the *Naxalite*” groups or forces. However, it is one thing to desire something but quite another to succeed. A clear-headed analysis will show that 42 years of fighting government forces has enabled “LWE” to hone its skills. A “frontal assault capability” in simple language means an ability to move 200–1,000 armed cadres to mount a swift raid on an armoury, or organise a jailbreak with spectacular success. It surely requires stable popular support to carry out such operations. In this sense, attempts to rout the Maoists militarily, which have been tried since 1967, has made them resilient.

It needs to be emphasised that the overwhelming majority of those who come under the omnibus category of “left-wing extremists” or those arrested are/were not involved in violent activity. They are engaged in legitimate political activity — working with and organising the exploited and the oppressed or writing about violations of their democratic rights, researching social issues, campaigning and protesting against injustice. Many of those arrested are not even “left-wing extremists”. It is by invoking the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA), 2004 and provisions under this act to proscribe that certain organisations, ideologies, political activities and anyone even hobnobbing with them are deemed to be “criminal”.⁴ By denying even legitimate political space, the government is sending a message that either the “left-wing extremists” should surrender or they pick up a gun. Common sense suggests that proscribing “LWE” from legitimate political activity is counterproductive. It is in the denial of what is legitimate that other means — including armed resistance — gain legitimacy.

The 60 years since transfer of power testifies to the fact that there were more occasions when people’s grievances were heard when they took to arms than when they resorted to non-violent protests. Even after 60 years since the transfer of power more than 77 per cent of our people survive on Rs 20 or less per day; land-related struggles have proliferated even as the incidence of riding roughshod over peaceful protests of the oppressed has multiplied. To expect that those consigned to the margins of existence will continue to display forbearance and patience is contrary to

⁴For more on the pernicious nature of the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, 2004, the reader may refer to the PUDR report, ‘Obsessive Pursuit: The Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (2004) Reinforcing a Draconian Law, January 2005, www.pudr.org

contemporary reality. The promise that corporate-led industrialisation will benefit them at some distant future is like a “pie in the sky” and not many are willing to resign themselves to wait for that to happen. It is in this context that the armed resistance derives its legitimacy. It is the criminal negligence of our people’s welfare that is responsible for causing the Maoist-led rebellion.

It is worth remembering that “peace talks” lost their meaning following the experience of Andhra Pradesh (AP). For all the propaganda of the AP state police and the intelligence bureau about the Maoists consolidating their position during the talks, the fact is that they were dealt a setback: 500–600 killed, 1,300 arrested, 76 “disappeared”. Insistence by the government that unless the “left-wing extremists” surrender their arms and give up their resistance there can be no negotiation has, in the light of AP experience of 2005, meant that Maoists have no choice but to defend themselves. Surrender by cadres is possible but that of the movement is clearly ruled out.

Regrettably, in this war, apart from civilian casualties, a large number of those whose dedication and commitment to their people’s emancipation is exemplary will perish. If the truth be told the Indian state has neither the imagination nor the inclination to conceive of anything other than privileging war against its own people. Nor is it interested in learning lessons from its 42-year old war against “LWE”. But, the Indian government ought not to be allowed to get away with claiming a privileged position in the name of “law and order” or sovereign right to mistreat its own people whom it turns into its enemies.